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Herbert Hoover

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Just off Main Street, in the little Iowa town of West Branch, there is a large well-kept park enclosed by a white board fence. The center of interest in this park is a small two-room white cottage. Here, on August 10, 1874, Herbert Clark Hoover, thirtieth President of the United States, was born. His birthplace has become a national shrine as have so many other houses, both large and small, which saw the birth of men of great affairs.

In 1928, when Herbert Hoover returned to West Branch to inaugurate his presidential campaign, the little house did not look as it does today. For years it had served as a kitchen annex of a larger house owned, at that time, by Mrs. Jennie Scellars. After Hoover's term of office, which began so auspiciously and ended so disastrously, the Hoover family took steps to restore and preserve his birthplace. A son, Allan Hoover, bought Mrs. Scellars' house and a dozen lots surrounding it in 1935. Subsequently, in 1938 the addition was removed, leaving the original two-room cottage on the site. Repairs were made and as much of the old Hoover furniture as possible collected and returned to the house.

What had been the background, the training,

and the experience of Herbert Hoover, to lead him to become President of the United States? How did the boy from this simple home reach a position held by only thirty-two men in all of the nation's 175 years of history?

His father, Jesse Hoover, was a blacksmith and a descendant of Cedar County pioneers. In 1853 Jesse's father, Eli, a Quaker farmer, had been one of the first settlers of West Branch. In 1870 Jesse Hoover married Huldah Minthorn, whose Quaker parents had moved to Iowa from Canada. Jesse then left his father's farm and moved into West Branch, built his little house and an adjoining blacksmith shop, and set himself up in business. Herbert was their second son; he had an older brother, Theodore, and, later, a younger sister, May. As the years passed, Jesse followed his trade, and Huldah, in addition to raising and caring for the small family, acted from time to time as minister of the West Branch Society of Friends.

This small average family circle was broken in 1880 when the father died of a fever. Four years later Huldah Hoover died, leaving her three orphaned children to the care of relatives. Herbert lived for a year with his Uncle Allan and Aunt Millie Hoover on their farm near West Branch. Then another uncle, Dr. H. John Minthorn, offered to take the young eleven-year-old to Oregon with him. Dr. Minthorn had recently founded a

Quaker academy at Newberg in Oregon; here his nephew was educated in the Quaker tradition.

As he boarded the train for Oregon in 1885, young Hoover scarcely dreamed that it was to be only the first of many long journeys — journeys which would carry him all over the world, to wealth, to fame, and to the White House in Washington. After a few years at Newberg, Dr. Minthorn moved to Salem, Oregon, and opened a land office where his nephew helped as office boy. Among the business handled by the Minthorn land agency was some mining property. Here young Herbert Hoover met a mining engineer, and his future was decided.

Meanwhile, a new college was opening in California — Leland Stanford. Young Herbert journeyed there in 1891, when he was but seventeen years old, to study mining. His savings were small, but by working at various jobs he completed the four years of study and received his degree in 1895. One of his most profitable college jobs, viewed in retrospect, was as secretary to John C. Branner, professor of geology. During summer vacations Hoover traveled with Dr. Branner and with the United States Geological Survey on surveying trips in Arkansas and in the Sierras. It was Dr. Branner, also, who introduced Hoover to a young lady from Iowa who was to play an even more important part in his life — Lou Henry.

Upon graduation Hoover found that no one was

clamoring for his services. Nothing daunted, he took a job as a laborer in the Mayflower mine at Silver City, Nevada. The following year, with this practical experience behind him, he traveled to San Francisco and asked Louis Janin, famous mining engineer, for a job. Janin did not need another engineer, but he let the young man stay on as a sort of general office assistant. Fortune was kind — when Janin needed a hurried report on a certain mining property, he asked Hoover to prepare it. Pleased with his young clerk's report, Janin asked how he could know so much about the problem. "I ought to know every foot and every vein of that mine because I once worked in it as a mucker," was the reply.

With this auspicious start, Hoover served for two years on Janin's staff, gaining much valuable experience. Then a British mining firm asked Janin to recommend an engineer to open up some new mines in Australia. Herbert Hoover, only twenty-three at the time, was given the recommendation and the job.

In Australia, Hoover introduced American mining methods, organized a staff, and brought equipment from the United States for the ten large mines owned by his employers. Then, while on an inspection trip, he discovered another mine which proved to be one of the richest in Australia. His name soon became well and favorably known in mining circles. When the Chinese government

wanted an engineer to head their new department of mines and railways, they sought out Herbert Hoover.

Before taking up his work in China, however, the young engineer returned to California where he married Lou Henry at Monterey in 1899. They left at once for the Far East. Hoover was twenty-five years old, he had graduated from Leland Stanford only four years before, but he already had an established reputation in his field and a pioneering job to do.

The years in China were busy ones. From his base at Peking, Hoover traveled all over that vast country — by boat, by camel, or on shaggy ponies. These were the years of great European exploitation of the resources of China, and the Chinese people were restless. In 1900, while the Hoovers were at Tientsin, this unrest flared into the Boxer Rebellion which overthrew the Chinese government. Tientsin, under siege by the rebels, was transformed into a fortress, partly by the help of Hoover and his corps of engineers. They built barricades, fought fires, manned the pumping station which supplied water, and stood sentinel until the storm had passed.

Hoover's activities in China ended with the downfall of the Chinese government. His work now took him to wider fields; in 1902 his former employers in Australia offered him a partnership in their London office. There now followed years of

work and travel. Hoover supervised mining operations in Europe, Russia, India, and Burma. Great success and great wealth came, as the years passed. But the Hoovers never cut their American ties; they maintained a home at Palo Alto to which they returned at least once a year. By the time he was forty, in 1914, Herbert Hoover had an international reputation in mining circles; world events would now thrust him onto a wider stage.

San Francisco was planning a huge Panama-Pacific Exposition in 1914. The officials asked Hoover, who was well known in European capitals, to solicit aid and exhibits for their fair. Thus, in the fateful days of July and August of 1914, when European armies began to march, Hoover found himself in London, his original mission forgotten, helping stranded Americans find a way home. Perhaps for the first time the name of Hoover appeared in Iowa newspapers. On August 7, 1914, the Des Moines *Register and Leader,* in a short paragraph on the first page, printed a story with a London date line:

> Many Americans here today asked for help to obtain food and lodging. There were many instances of persons with gold certificates in their pockets walking the streets all night hungry. Some of these were relieved by small unsecured loans from H. C. Hoover of California, who spent most of the day working to obtain a reasonable rate of exchange for American bills.

People in Waterloo, Mrs. Hoover's old home,

evidently recognized the name; the following day the *Register* found room, on page seven, for a two-paragraph story headed "H. C. Hoover is an Iowan." The story, however, mistakenly credited Le Grand, Iowa, as Hoover's birthplace, possibly because many Hoover relatives lived there. During the following years the Hoover name moved from the back pages of the newspapers to headlines on the front page. His national career had begun.

America's ambassador in London, Walter Hines Page, was grateful to Hoover for his aid in financing Americans caught in the financial chaos which followed the outbreak of the war. He wrote to President Wilson of Hoover: "He's a simple, modest, energetic man who began his career in California and will end it in Heaven." Meanwhile, the German armies rolled over Belgium, leaving destruction and starvation in their wake. Pleas for aid came from Americans in Belgium, and from Brand Whitlock, American ambassador at Brussels. It was inevitable that Page, in London, should turn to Hoover for aid.

With his usual energy and organizing ability, Hoover established the Commission for Relief in Belgium, and began gathering funds, ships, clothing, medicine, and food. Belgium, which imported about 80 per cent of its food, was completely cut off by the Allied blockade of Europe. Thus it was Hoover's job to convince both sides in the conflict

that the Belgians must be fed. Such was his success that Page wrote in 1916: "But for Hoover Belgium would now be starved." Today, in the park surrounding the birthplace in West Branch, there is a statue of Isis — the Goddess of Life — the work of a Belgian sculptor. It was the gift of grateful Belgian children, refugees, and soldiers in recognition of Hoover's distinguished service to their country.

With such a record of success in Belgium, it was natural that Hoover should be called home when America entered the war in 1917. President Wilson promptly gave him the task of controlling American food supplies, under the title "United States Food Administrator." His duties were two-fold — he must make food denial popular, and he must stimulate food production. "Food Will Win the War" was the telling slogan of the publicity campaign instituted to bring home to Americans the importance of self-denial. "Serve Just Enough" was another popular phrase. Wheatless Mondays and Wednesdays, meatless Tuesdays, porkless Thursdays and Saturdays, "Victory" bread all week long — such were some of the suggestions of the Food Administrator. American housewives accepted these restrictions; they cut down on sugar, wheat, and fats — the crucial food items. To increase food supplies, Hoover appointed state and county food administrators to help the farmers increase their production — espe-

cially of wheat and hogs. All this was done on an entirely voluntary basis. The results enabled America to feed herself, her troops, and her Allies in Europe.

At the end of the war, Hoover's field of operations was widened. His American Relief Commission took on the task of feeding hungry Europe, until those war-torn nations could return to what America then called "normalcy." In 1921 a new catastrophe added to the world's woes — a terrible famine struck Russia. The best efforts of the new Soviet regime to hide this fact from the world were fruitless; Maxim Gorki, the great Russian writer, appealed personally to Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce, for aid. Again, Hoover came to the rescue of the hungry, but with certain conditions imposed. The Soviets were required to release American prisoners, and they must permit foreign relief workers to dispense aid to all the needy, regardless of class. Congress voted a fund of $20,000,000 for the Russians, while the Kremlin put up $11,000,000. In all, $78,000,000 was eventually raised for Russian relief, and the worst of the famine was defeated.

Meanwhile, the American people turned their attention from foreign to domestic affairs; they wanted no more of Europe or its wars. In the election of 1920 the Democrats went down to defeat, and Republican Warren G. Harding was swept into the White House. It was inevitable that one

of the best-known Americans, Herbert Hoover, should be a part of the new administration. Offered his choice of cabinet posts, he chose that of Commerce because of his life-long interest in business and management. His seven years in that office, under Presidents Harding and Coolidge, were fruitful. He raised the post to new importance, and he aided business in organizing, standardizing, and economizing. Hoover's task, as he saw it, was the raising of the standard of living, the promotion of business stability, and "the economic welfare of the American people." The voluntary trade associations of manufacturers, encouraged by the energetic Secretary of Commerce, "sought to eliminate abuse and unfair competition" in industry and also "to eliminate government from business."

When Calvin Coolidge did not "choose to run" for president in 1928, Herbert Hoover's name naturally led the list of possible candidates. As the time for the Republican National Convention at Kansas City approached, two names were at the top — Herbert Hoover and Ex-Governor Frank O. Lowden of Illinois. The Iowa delegation of twenty-nine Republicans was committed, not to the "native son," but to the neighbor from Illinois. The crucial test would be the stand of the Convention on agriculture. The farmers, not sharing in the general business prosperity of the "golden twenties," were clamoring for some form of gov-

ernment aid. The agricultural plank of the Republican platform did not please Lowden — on the eve of balloting for a candidate he withdrew his name. Herbert Hoover was nominated on the first ballot, on June 15, 1928.

In West Branch "bedtime never did roll around" that night. Bands, fireworks, and "fifty-seven varieties of noise" celebrated the achievement of Bert Hoover. Mrs. Jennie Scellars must then have begun to realize the importance of her home as the birthplace of a President of the United States. When, after his acceptance speech at Palo Alto in early August, Hoover laid plans to open his campaign at West Branch, the little village sprang into national importance. Even though, through the new medium of radio, it was not necessary to attend political rallies to hear the candidate, some 10,000 people descended on little West Branch on August 21 to hear Herbert Hoover's opening campaign address.

Iowans — and especially those in West Branch — were busy before that date, however. For the first time in American history a man born west of the Mississippi had been nominated for the highest office in the land. Ten days before, some 30,000,000 people had listened to the Hoover acceptance speech over the radio, and the Des Moines *Register* had pointed out the significance of that event: "The size of the audience alone will make this the most notable occasion of its kind in the human rec-

ord thus far." But the *Register* had no qualms about the performance of the candidate: he was "fully equal to the occasion." Now, a much smaller number would see him at West Branch, where a "subdued carnival spirit" prevailed.

The Hoover campaign train reached West Branch Tuesday morning, August 21, and the candidate was at once whisked "home" to Mrs. Scellars' house, where a typical Iowa August breakfast awaited him: peaches and cream, ham and eggs, hot biscuits, honey, strawberry jam, and coffee. Friends, old and new, milled around the streets waiting for a glimpse of "the next President of the United States." There followed a day filled with visits to the scenes of his childhood, talks with the old friends, and political conferences with the new ones. His speech in the evening was all that they had expected. He was "proud to have been born in Iowa," he told them. "I have ofttimes said that the good Lord made it the richest stretch of agricultural land that ever blessed any one sovereign government." Then he talked about agriculture, the leading problem of the campaign, and he closed with words which reveal the natural bent of his mind:

> And I must say again that the solution of these problems has but one purpose — that is, the comfort and welfare of the American family and the American home. The family is the unit of American life and the home is the sanctuary of moral inspiration and of American spirit. The true con-

ception of America is not a country of 110,000,000 people, but a nation of 23,000,000 families living in 23,000,000 homes. I pledge my services to these homes.

The campaign which followed, between Republican Herbert Hoover and Democrat Al Smith, swung back and forth between the problems of agriculture, the tariff, and prohibition. As usual, there were breaks in the party ranks. A few prominent Republicans went over to the Democrats, while some Democrats announced a preference for Hoover. Smith W. Brookhart, Iowa's fiery Senator, surprised everybody by endorsing Hoover enthusiastically. No one saw the black cloud on the financial horizon. Both candidates worked hard; both offered their programs to the American people. On election day the people chose; the victory of Herbert Hoover was an overwhelming landslide, reaching even into the traditionally Democratic South. Smith carried only eight states. West Branch and Iowa and the nation rejoiced. Four years passed. Herbert Hoover was again the Republican candidate; his opponent was Franklin D. Roosevelt, Governor of New York. Again there was a landslide; but this time a Democratic one. Hoover, who had carried forty states in 1928, won only six in 1932. What had happened?

This overwhelming defeat dates back to October 23, 1929. On that day the American stock market, which had been climbing each day to dizzier heights, slipped and fell. Two billion dollars

in paper profits disappeared. The following day three billion dollars more vanished from the ticker tapes. Wall Street bankers rose to the occasion and threw fortunes into the market to stay the tide, and there was a pause. Then came Black Thursday — October 29, 1929 — and even blacker Friday. Five billion, ten billion — so it went. In all, some thirty billion dollars were lost by investors. As winter set in, the inevitable aftermath came — business and bank failures, unemployment, and breadlines.

The first seven months of the Hoover administration had been normal. Prosperity continued, and an extra session of Congress took up farm relief and began the struggle over tariff. The whole aspect of American life changed with the October stock market collapse. Fear gripped the nation, and men looked for a scapegoat. Reassuring words came from Washington and Wall Street, but as the months passed the depression deepened.

In the past, American presidents had been content to "ride out" a financial panic, trusting to the soundness of American economy to right itself. Hoover broke this tradition. The government stepped in with efforts to stem the tide. Taxes were cut; funds were voted for some types of public works; a moratorium was placed on war debts to relieve Europe, also suffering from the world-wide financial collapse; the Reconstruction Finance Corporation was established to aid business;

the Farm Loan and Home Loan Acts — measures presaging the more far-reaching legislation of the New Deal period — were passed. Unhappily, none of these served to alleviate conditions for very long.

By 1932 the nation had found its scapegoat — the administration, and especially the President. It was inevitable that the Republican party would lose the 1932 presidential election. Herbert Hoover "reaped the whirlwind" of an overexpanded economy which had resulted in the most severe depression in American history. From a peak of popularity in March of 1929, Hoover went out of office in March, 1933, bearing the blame for an economic collapse which had been far beyond the power of any one man to prevent.

With the passage of the years, opinions have changed. Herbert Hoover has attained the honored position of an "elder statesman" whose advice is sought on many problems, both national and international. Men now know that he was the victim, not the creator, of the Great Depression. The wisdom of hindsight has reapportioned the economic causes of the tragic years of the thirties and has shown that the Hoover measures, if perhaps too little and too late, at least paved the way for the more drastic legislation needed to cope with almost complete economic collapse.

Probably the most significant work of Hoover's later years is the commission which, under his

leadership, has made a study of reorganization of the executive branch of the federal government. In 1946, at the request of President Truman, Hoover also undertook the coordination of the food supplies of thirty-eight European countries; again, in 1947, he made a study of the economic situation in Germany and Austria for the President. He is an honorary citizen of many European cities; fifty-eight universities and colleges have given him honorary degrees; and societies of many kinds have made awards of medals. The latest of these honors is the "Iowa Award," presented to Iowa's famous native son before a tremendous throng at the State Fair in 1951. When Iowa laid plans for the giving of such an Award, it was natural and inevitable that the first recipient should be Herbert Hoover. The "Iowa Award" has been appropriately placed in the gateway to his home at West Branch.

Meanwhile, the birthplace site at West Branch, Iowa, grows in size and attraction. On Herbert Hoover's seventy-fourth birthday, August 10, 1948, he made another journey home and spoke to Iowa and the nation on his concept of "The Meaning of America."

MILDRED THRONE